A Project Academy – Something Worthwhile?

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The Swedish Project Academy was started in 1994 – almost 20 years ago – as a cooperation between people connected to projects in business or in the public sector and people from academia. The initiative came from industry, but the step was quite natural since the connections between academics and the practical world had grown strong also prior to the formal step.

The task for the Academy is to contribute to develop the method of project work in business and in the public sector. The Academy has some similarity to the Swedish Academy in the sense that membership is limited. In this case there are 33 members, one third of which are consultants in the project area, one third consists of project managers and one third academics taking a special interest in projects and temporary organizations.

As to activities, the Academy is very active in various fields:

1) The Project Manager of the year award is given by the Academy
2) It provides a list of suitable thesis areas/titles for the bachelor and master level at universities
3) It selects the best thesis in the project area and provides a reward for the author(s)
4) It organizes workshops internally for the members of the Academy
5) It arranges seminars where people in practice are updated on the latest news in research
6) It regularly holds meetings together with industrial enterprises or public organizations

In order to make a well grounded choice the Academy does a very elaborate job in order to find good candidates, comparing them and making the choice after collecting an impressive amount of information. Leadership qualities and project results are evaluated along with assessment of project complexity and degree of innovation in leadership and project execution.

Over the years, the winners have come from a wide variety of activities ranging from the project to connect Sweden and Denmark with a bridge, to launch a museum on a special set of artifacts to show. The 2011 winner was Marie Reinicke who held the main responsibility for the World Scout Jamboree 2011. She built an organization based on trust, volunteers and a capacity to deliver that created a memorable event organized very efficiently. As an individual she represented both the spirit of the scouting
movement and the efficiency of a high profile project manager and set an example for others to follow. Similar qualities gave Bengt Eveby, responsible for the world biathlon championship in 2008, the award.

Another category of award winner was represented by Peter Rathsman in 2005, project manager for space satellite SMART-1 project, and Kaj Ahlbom in 2009, project manager for Swedish nuclear waste project. They built their competence on engineering skills but were able to combine engineering with a profound understanding of communication, team building and the need for cross disciplinary development. Both award winners delivered results according to plans but also made major contributions to a wider context in terms of industrial networks or the general public.

If the Swedish Project Academy Awards is taken as an indication of Scandinavian project management skills some important notions can be made:

1. Successful industrial projects are based on core engineering skills combined with a true and genuine understanding of the need for cultural and social aspects as well as to make more out of the team and task at hand.

2. Successful project managers tend to have a strict plan but also a readiness to engage in dialogue and communication on the project goals and expected outcomes with team members, stakeholders or outside partners.

3. Successful project managers are individuals with a strong confidence and open personality but, at the same time, willing to debate their authority and share responsibilities with the project team as long as the focus is kept.

4. Successful project managers have generally one quality in common – they are members of a team rather than almighty managers. A simple way to say this is that they are democratic leaders.
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